

A CLOSER LOOK



Yellow-rumped warbler.

MIGRATION MYSTERIES

We're familiar with seasonal movements of birds. It happens twice a year like clockwork, and it will happen here again soon. Birds of all shapes and sizes – from American white pelicans to American robins – will begin their long, winged journeys north from wintering grounds to habitat better suited for nesting and raising young.

There are 650 different bird species in North America that make seasonal migrations of some distance each spring and fall. Considering the hazards birds face during these long aerial treks, it's a wonder more don't stay put.

For instance, why would a bird as small as the yellow-rumped warbler (see photo above) leave its breeding ground on the Northern Plains and fly thousands of miles to winter along the coast of Texas, then turn around and fly all the way back in spring? Why not take up permanent residence on the beach?

For birds that breed in the northern United States and Canada, it is a life of risk and reward. The temperate summer climate in northern regions provides the yellow-rumped warbler and other species the best environment to raise young. On the other hand, winter on the plains can be harsh, especially for a small bird that depends chiefly on insects for food. Consequently, the yellow-rumped warbler must cheat winter by migrating south to Texas and warmer weather.

When it is time to beat wings – no matter which direction the bird is heading – the little warbler waits until sundown before departing. Yellow-rumped warblers migrate at night for a couple of reasons. First, the act of flying produces large amounts of body heat – the same as human exercise – and cooler night air keeps the birds from overheating. Second, the air at night is generally less turbulent – less wind – reducing the energy these little birds need to make their marathon flights.

To keep their bearings at night, yellow-rumped warblers, like other long-distance migrants, are believed to follow internal magnetic compasses. Other birds use landmarks – rivers and mountain ranges, for instance – for guidance.

There are as many reasons and methods of migration as there are feathered participants. But every year we learn more about the habits of these amazing species, getting us a little closer to solving the mysteries of migration.

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